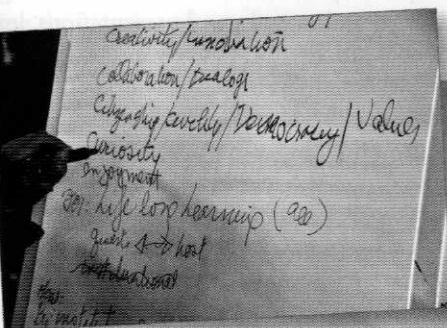


From Quiet Havens to Modern Agoras: Libraries and Museums in an Era of Participatory Culture

by Nancy E. Rogers, Susanna Seidl-Fox, and Deborah Mack

Herman Seidl



Drafting
working group
recommendations.

Leopoldskron
in Salzburg,
Austria, setting
for *The Sound of
Music* as well as
the conference
venue.



Andrea Lopez-Portillo

“WE ARE NOT YOUR GRANDFATHER’S LIBRARIES OR MUSEUMS,” wrote Beth Takekawa, the executive director of the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience in Seattle, Washington, after attending a seminar on “Libraries and Museums in an Era of Participatory Culture” in Salzburg, Austria. Takekawa was one of fifty-eight library, museum, and cultural heritage leaders from thirty-one countries who gathered in October 2011 at the Salzburg Global Seminar to explore this exciting, highly relevant topic. As they wrestled with the meaning of “participation” writ large, the group soon became aware that such terms as “community,” “access,” and “public value” resonate quite differently in the disparate parts of our planet today.



Working group discussion on "Culture and Communities."

The seminar was convened jointly by the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the primary source of federal support for libraries and museums in the United States, and the Salzburg Global Seminar, a non-profit organization known for its global convening power and based at Schloss Leopoldskron in Salzburg, Austria. The four-day session plunged leaders from Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and North and South America into discussion, debate, and the development of a series of practical recommendations for ensuring maximum access to and engagement in the work of museums and libraries worldwide.

Over the course of the seminar, they explored the role of their institutions at a time when individuals can carry the equivalent of an entire encyclopedia on their mobile devices and when people can use social media platforms to share information, analyze data, create new knowledge, and connect to communities of interest. Such technological developments obviously contribute to the creation of changing expectations for the museum and library experience.

Organizers designed this seminar to engage thinkers with a wide variety of professional experiences (approximately half came from libraries and half from museums) and cultural and regional backgrounds to debate the changing roles and responsibilities of libraries and museums in their societies. As one participant wrote afterwards, "The combination of participants from various countries, continents, experi-

ences, and life paths was a wonderful, unexpected, mixed masala." Inspired by case studies from around the globe, personal stories, and more formal presentations, leading to sometimes contentious, always lively discussions, the participants recognized that this is a critical moment for libraries and museums worldwide and a time for possible reorientation and reinvention.

Building on the IMLS initiatives, *The Future of Museums and Libraries* and *Museums, Libraries, and 21st-Century Skills*, as well as on past Salzburg Global Seminar museum and library sessions, the seminar included five plenary sessions, a fireside chat, a keynote presentation, and a roundtable discussion. In addition, fellows divided into five working groups to delve into and elaborate upon specific topics, concluding with a series of recommendations for action. Organizers based topics of those working groups on the five plenary sessions: Culture and Communities; Learning Transformed; Communication and Technologies; Building the Skills of Library and Museum Professionals; and Demonstrating Public Value.

In the spirit of making the seminar more participatory in real time—and of extending the reach of the conversations—Michael Stephens from San Jose State University and Rob Stein from the Indianapolis Museum of Art broadcast daily interactive blogs internationally.¹

Seminar Takeaway Messages

Over the course of the discussions and debates, participants returned again and again to the power of participatory learning as the visionary core of what museum and library professionals need to know and do to transform institutional effectiveness. Nothing less than a call to action, the working groups provided both recommendations and action steps for policy and practices, so that museums and libraries become more democratic in their operations and engagement, and community members better equipped and skilled to be active contributors in a sustainable global future. Participants repeatedly acknowledged that institutions must embrace new language, ideas, perspectives, and public accountability and recognize:

- The changing language (users/guests/clients, for example), which reflects evolving institutional realities and expectations;

VISHAKHA DESAI

President and CEO
of the Asia Society in New York

Our job is not simply about presenting and providing quality information or quality experience. Our job now is to be a catalyst for ideas and conversations, to serve as a moderator rather than as a scholarly presenter of content. This is something that we have begun to talk about in a dialogic way within our institutions, but it becomes equally important in terms of how you use technology going forward.

- The desire to position libraries and museums as change agents, cultural hubs, and multitasking civic centers, and to encourage lifelong learning—with passion and with risk-taking; and
- The imperative to demonstrate public value and social impact and to keep these issues at the top of the organizational agenda.

The group acknowledged that the above requires both internal and collaborative work and action steps:

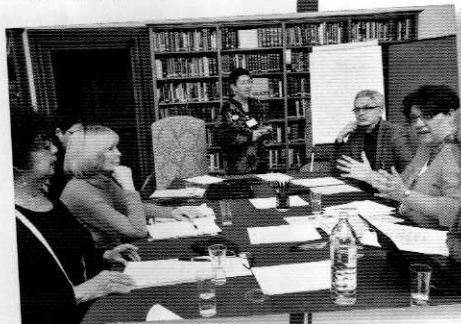
- “Walking the talk” and becoming more participatory, internally as well as externally;
- Improving the training curriculum of library, museum, and heritage professionals;
- Acknowledging the changing role of the curator/internal expert. Expertise is still necessary, but the best work being done now is about both scholarship AND public engagement;
- Embracing the learning of new literacies, especially visual literacy; and
- Opening institutional walls, instead of defining barriers, thus taking on an outward rather than an inward orientation.

The participatory nature of new technologies can enhance the ways in which libraries and museums and their users interact and connect. Even so, there is no one-size-fits-all in communications strategies. The creators of digital resources need to contribute to the establishment of open standards that can help achieve interoperability for the exchange of digital objects. Similarly, libraries and museums should contribute their content to a diverse array of repositories that make content freely available, as part of a cultural commons for consumers to access and reuse in the creation of knowledge. Among the tools available to accomplish this mission are digital collections that span institutional boundaries; physical spaces that enhance interactivity and discovery; and organizations that share collections and staff expertise more effectively, thereby reducing costs and enhancing the quality of services.

The participants concurred that the most effective tools are in our heads if we are to engage the public in profound ways that deliver real and sustained impact. Significantly, they shared a sense of immediacy and consensus that libraries and museums must be repurposed, rethought, and re-imagined as places of lifelong learning, as responsible stewards of cultural heritage, and as community anchors that are deeply invested in both programs and people.

“One Thing I Will Do Differently After This Session...”

At the end of the seminar, the fellows submitted a list of personal commitments for action to be undertaken in their own countries and institutions after their return. Inspired by the presentations, the case studies, and the informal conver-



Working group focused on “Learning Transformed.”

Key Overarching Messages *from the Seminar*

FOR THE WORLD'S LIBRARIES AND MUSEUMS,
AN ERA OF PARTICIPATORY CULTURE
DEMANDS THAT WE:

Recognize the importance of cultural, economic, and social diversity in our communities.

Accept the notion of democratic access.

Acknowledge the need for new language, semantics, and naming, which reflect the changing realities and expectations for our institutions.

Accept new obligations, accountability, and responsibilities within our institutions.

Place a major emphasis on public value and impact.

Embrace the changing nature of authority, allowing for co-creation of content and input from virtual visitors as an accepted part of our work.

Recognize the blurring of distinctions between in-school and out-of-school learning.

Embrace early and lifelong learning as key to our mission.

Accept the need for changes in the internal culture of our organizations and demonstrate participatory culture internally as well as externally.

Recognize that technology is a tool and that participation depends upon people, not merely upon technology.

Incorporate online, social media into our mission and strategic thinking.

Join the new wave of collaboration with other cultural institutions via sharing of staff and collections and other means.

Open our walls, break down boundaries, and orient ourselves outwardly, becoming the modern equivalent of the agora as a hub of communication.

Change the curriculum for the training of museum and library professionals in order to address the demands and realities of participatory culture.

Create partnerships with the community and community organizations.

Act with passion and creativity as agents of permanent change.

sations with their colleagues in Salzburg, they made pledges in six broad areas, including actions that would take place within their home institutions, making them more participatory and collaborative in nature; commitments to creating national impact; strategies for becoming more “global” in their thinking; improvements to courses and curricula for training museum and library professionals; more effective use of technology; and dissemination of the session report to politicians, media, and governing authorities in order to raise awareness of the nature of participatory culture and its new demands on museums and libraries.

Under the leadership of David Lankes, a professor at Syracuse University, session participants are further documenting and refining the curricular framework developed at the seminar by the working group on Building the Skills of Library and Museum Professionals. Their intention is to map the curriculum to other major curricula, accreditation standards, and continuing education efforts in libraries and museums, and to support an online discussion around the curriculum.²

IMLS and SGS recently published a full report on the session, available online at <http://j.mp/SalzburgReport>. In addition

to the working groups’ detailed recommendations, the report features sixteen “Imperatives for the Future” (see page nine). Museum and library professionals should take a moment to read through this list of carefully considered obligations.

Are you and your institutions ready to embrace this new era, in which “Your Grandfather’s Museums and Libraries” have moved away from being marble palaces or quiet havens, to resembling agoras or marketplaces emblematic of our contemporary, participatory culture?

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SAWSAN AL-DALAQ

Director, The Children’s Museum, Amman, Jordan

I cannot tell you how many things I will be using from this to inspire my team and eventually inspire our board. I think it is mainly about engaging the public and listening to our stakeholders. To put it quite simply we need to come off our high horses and listen to what people want and need. That is the main message.

¹ See <http://j.mp/StephensSalzburg> and <http://rjstein.com/blog>.

² For further information, see <http://j.mp/SalzCurr>.

St. Peter’s Church

Faith in Action for 250 Years

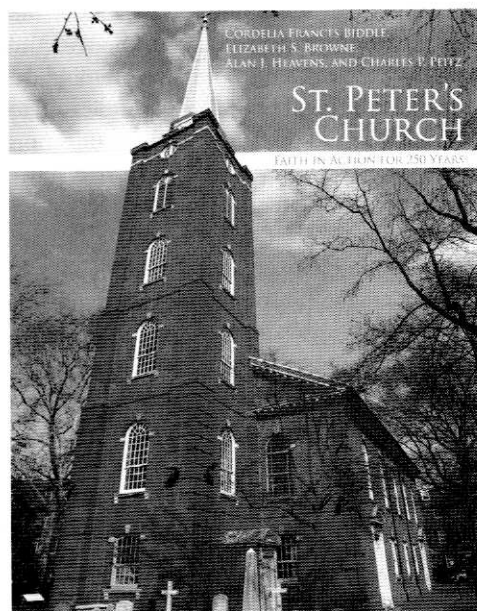
CORDELIA FRANCES BIDDLE, ELIZABETH S. BROWNE, ALAN J. HEAVENS, AND CHARLES PEITZ

“This is the most beautifully presented church history I have ever seen. The author team skillfully weaves together many strands of a venerable Philadelphia church.... Utterly frank in discussing the church’s low points as well as high points, it is a fascinating exploration of one of Philadelphia’s treasures.”

—Gary B. Nash, Director, National Center for History in the Schools, UCLA

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